

# DATCP Farm Center: Not just for times of crisis

With farm sector profit levels for 2016 forecast to follow some of the same challenging trends established in 2015, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's Farm Center expects to see an increase in the number of farmers contacting the center for information and support.

"It's the boom and bust nature of farming," said Kathy Schmitt, Farm Center director. "When the situation gets tougher on the farm, our number of calls goes up. Through the end of October, call volume for 2015 was running nearly 10 percent higher than in 2014."

And, although well-prepared to help farmers in times of crisis, Schmitt emphasizes the center also is there to help farmers increase their profitability when times are good.

"I cannot stress that enough," said Schmitt, "We will continue to provide help for farmers in crisis, but we believe that with strong front-end planning we can help farmers prevent financial losses."

The Farm Center, part of DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development, is dedicated to growing Wisconsin agriculture. Its mission, simply stated, is to help farmers.

The center's agricultural economic development consultants help all types of Wisconsin farmers deal with the critical economic, business and social needs of farm families. Services provided include financial and business consultation, farm succession planning, conflict mediation, production challenges and other assistance.

Many of the calls for advice or assistance come in to the center's telephone Helpline and are directed to staff agricultural consultants with expertise in a wide variety of areas.

"Our financial counselors are out in the field, sitting down with people at the kitchen table, and helping them plan for profit. We can also be a major tool in the toolbox of beginning farmers, as well as for farming families looking to transition from one generation to the next," said Schmitt.

In fact, said Schmitt, with the 2012 Census reporting that the average age of a Wisconsin farmer is 57.1 years, the Farm Center expects to see an increase in its workload dedicated to succession planning.

"We see an increasing trend of farmers seeking succession planning help and an increase in services through DATCP, UW-Extension, and private consultants and attorneys addressing this need," said Schmitt. "This year, 55 percent of our cases were for succession planning assistance, up from 50 percent just a few years ago."

According to Schmitt, the United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Statistics Services (USDA NASS) indicates from its 2012 census that there were 7,477 Wisconsin dairy

farms with operators between the ages of 45 and 64 – a critical time for business succession planning.

“If we estimate that one-third of these dairy farms have business succession plans in place, that leaves approximately 5,000 farms needing some type of business succession or exit planning,” she said. “As far as future trends, that is one of the main areas we expect we’ll be dealing with.”

Schmitt said the Farm Center provides needed information and support to farmers in order to help grow Wisconsin’s agricultural economy. The center does this by partnering with industry groups, the University of Wisconsin, and other stakeholders in the agriculture business.

Core programs are:

- Agricultural Economic Development: Consultants help Wisconsin farmers deal with the critical economic, business and social needs of farm families. Some of the services the Farm Center provides are financial and business consultation, farm succession planning, conflict mediation, and production challenges. During the 2013-2015 biennium, 161 cases were for financial planning, 154 cases were for transition and estate planning, and six cases were for beginning farmers. An estimated 81% of clients followed or are following Farm Center recommendations.
- Organics, Livestock Grazing and Specialty Crops: This program provides information and technical assistance to organic growers and processors. In addition, the program works to strengthen farm support services and processing capacity, along with a host of other services. During the biennium, the program provided technical assistance to 115 clients, along with consultants of other services, and managed 31 Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative grants. Also, program staff participated in 13 events to connect with stakeholders and gather more information on the latest developments in technology that can impact organics, livestock grazing and specialty crops farmers.
- Minority Farmers Outreach: This program provides outreach and risk management assistance to beginning and minority farmers to increase their sustainability and profitability. The program emphasizes working with Hmong fresh market producers and Hmong ginseng growers, but assists all minority farmers facing production or marketing challenges and opportunities. During the 2013-2015 biennium, the program worked with 51 Hmong ginseng farms, offered 14 Hmong farmers mini summits, organized nine workshops in risk management tools and nine workshops in safe food handling skills. In December, 2015 nearly 20 members of Wisconsin’s Hmong agricultural growing community participated in a two-day training program designed to help them understand the complexities of pesticide application including pesticide regulations, understanding labeling instructions, calibrating equipment, and keeping pesticides on target. Held at the Arlington Agriculture Research Station and organized by DATCP’s Division of Agricultural Development, the program featured instruction from educators

and industry experts from UW-Extension, UW-Madison and DATCP, and language interpretation from Farm Center consultants.

- Rural Electric Power Services: Through this program, administered in cooperation with the Wisconsin Public Service Commission, consultants address stray voltage problems that can adversely affect cattle and milk production on dairy farms. Under the program, a stray voltage analysis team evaluates individual stray voltage problems and recommends possible solutions. As part of a whole farm evaluation, the program offers related herd health diagnostic services. Veterinarians provide herd and livestock diagnostics, milking and dairy equipment diagnostics, and feed and nutritional value diagnostics, among other services. During the biennium, consultants provided 23 technical assistance services in power quality and other electrical related services. Also, 48 clients were assisted with consultations under our herd health services. During the herd based diagnostic services, issues the veterinarians commonly addresses on the farm were: 40% of low production, death losses, and higher than desired health problems, 40% of high somatic cell counts and high prevalence of clinical mastitis, and 20% of lameness, infertility calf losses/disease and behavioral issues (failure to enter parlor, kicking, etc.)
- Mediation and Arbitration: This program provides mediation services for farmer disputes ranging from credit issues to environmental concerns to farm family conflicts. Mediation involves a neutral individual who helps facilitate negotiation and understanding between conflicting parties. Confidentiality is upheld throughout the mediation process and after it concludes. During 2015, 35 new cases were opened, 16 cases were carried forward from 2014, and 40 cases were closed.

Farmers and small agribusiness owners can get in touch with the Farm Center through the toll-free line at 1-800-942-2474. For more information about the Farm Center, visit [datcp.wi.gov/Farms/Wisconsin Farm Center/index.aspx](http://datcp.wi.gov/Farms/Wisconsin_Farm_Center/index.aspx)